

# The *Odes* of Pindar and the modern Olympic Games

Armand D'Angour

When the ancient Olympic Games were revived in the modern world in 1896, a scholar called Robertson wrote a 'victory ode' in the style of the great Greek poet Pindar (right) to commemorate the occasion. Who was Pindar? And what was the nature of his 'victory poetry'? In this article, Armand D'Angour – who was commissioned in 2004 to compose a victory ode in Greek to celebrate the Olympics – offers unique insight into Pindar and his art...and lets *Omnibus* readers into a surprise in store at the London Olympics 2012!

## 1896 Olympics: a new Pindaric ode

The first of the modern Olympic Games took place in Athens in 1896. They were the triumphant outcome of Baron Pierre de Coubertin's vision of reviving classical Greek ideals of physical and sporting excellence. In the event, something else was revived: the Pindaric ode. At the closing ceremony of the Games, de Coubertin reported, 'one of the contestants, Mr. Robertson, an Oxford student, recited an Ode which he had composed, in ancient Greek and in the Pindaric mode, in honour of the games.'

The idea of reciting a newly-composed 'Pindaric ode' at the Games would immediately have sprung to the minds of classical scholars of the late nineteenth century. Pindar (c. 522–443 B.C.) was considered to be, in his own times and beyond, the principal poet of the nation that founded the Games and was to celebrate them over the course of around a thousand years. By an accident of history, all forty-four of Pindar's *Victory Odes* (*epinikia* in Greek) have survived. They celebrate the winners of various events – running, boxing, chariot racing, wrestling, and so on – at the four main locations of Games in the ancient world, i.e. Olympia, Delphi (the Pythian Games), Nemea, and at the Isthmus of Corinth. These odes provided excellent models for scholars such as Robertson to imitate. And though the discipline of Greek verse composition is rarely practised nowadays, there are still some corners of academia in which such a task might be envisaged...

Victory odes arose in Greece in the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C. They were composed to be performed to music by choruses, and they were written in honour of individuals – mainly aristocratic athletes or patrons – who commissioned them to publicize their athletic success. These patrons believed that such songs would give them fame even after their death, since they would be learned by heart and regularly repeated in private and public contexts in cities all over Greece. In his time, around 500–450 B.C., Pindar was acknowledged as the supreme master of the genre... and in his *Odes* he clearly indicates that he thought so as well!

We know next to nothing of the music to which the *Odes* were sung, but we can work out the rhythms very precisely from the words. Most of Pindar's *Odes* are composed in sections of three stanzas, and employ complex metrical patterns which are repeated from section to section. This is a challenging procedure, given the need to pursue a coherent narrative while preserving poetic integrity and avoiding artificiality of expression. Not everyone thinks that Pindar succeeded in doing so. The sheer difficulty of understanding and appreciating his poems, with their obscure style and expression, was already notorious in antiquity. In his comedy *Birds* of 414 B.C., a generation after Pindar's death, Aristophanes composed some verses of oracular gobbledygook in deliberate parody of Pindaric style.

But those who persevere with Pindar's *Odes* can find themselves entranced by their poetic beauty and mystery...

Of the various Games held in ancient Greece, those at Olympia (below), traditionally first held in 776 B.C., commanded the highest prestige. 'The best thing, they say, is water', begins the Pindar's first *Olympian Ode*, 'and gold shines out like gleaming fire in night-time, the highest form of wealth...'

*But if, my soul, you want to speak  
of athletic contests,  
look no further than the sun for the  
hottest  
of shining stars in the empty sky,  
nor let us speak of any Games  
greater than those of Olympia.*

The revived Olympics were held at Athens, not Olympia, nor have the modern Games ever been held at Olympia itself. The 'Olympic tradition' is largely a modern construct, and to compose a Pindaric ode for the modern Olympics is an artificial exercise. After all, an ode composed before the Games have even taken place cannot be a true victory ode – there are no winners as yet to celebrate! But of all Olympic Games of modern times at which such an exercise might seem appropriate, those held in Athens in 1896 – and then for a second time in 2004 – will have been the obvious occasions to think of reviving the ancient Greek genre in some form. Robertson's ode in 1896 celebrated Greece itself; and in 2004 the occasion arose again – this time to honour the city of Athens in ancient Greek verse.

## The Athens Olympics 2004

The opportunity to compose a new ode arose in early 2004, when Mary Glen-Haig, a former Olympic fencer and member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), insisted to IOC President Rogge that a Pindaric ode should feature at the Games. I was asked to write the ode, and composed a 25-line poem of three stanzas in Greek verse. I wrote it in praise of Athens: as the winner of the bid to host the Games, the city was the only 'victor' one could celebrate at that point. I chose one of Pindar's favoured metres, and based the content closely on his own words and expression.

The themes of my ode are characteris-

What was a victory ode?

The ancient Olympics

tically Pindaric. It celebrates the city for its divine patron Athena and for its most famous hero Theseus. It alludes to the ancestry of the Athenians, who were the descendants of the legendary Erechtheus – hence they were called ‘Erechtheids’. It praises Athens’ deeds in sending heroes to the Games, and twice hosting the Olympics, and commends the city for the qualities of wisdom, brilliance, and hospitality. The city’s success is connected to the splendour of the Games – and typically, if rather immodestly to a modern ear, linked to the elevated skill of the poet himself. In the following translation, Pindar’s original metrical form with its long and short syllables is represented by a similar arrangement of syllables in English.

### **Pindar at the London Olympics 2012..?**

This ode was recited in Athens on the last day of the Olympics in 2004, and received wide press coverage, though few people understood what it was all about – a fate evidently suffered by Pindar’s own poetry throughout most of the past 2500 years. A question now remains: will a Pindaric ode be composed for the London Olympics in 2012?

Mayor of London Boris Johnson has made no secret of his desire for such an ode to be written and presented in some form. Everyone remembers how London celebrated with the jubilant Kelly Holmes and Sebastian Coe when the city won its bid to host the Games, and millions are looking forward to the success of athletes such as Usain Bolt. But what should such an ode say about these events, and would the audience of the London Games have the faintest idea of or interest in the history and significance of a song composed in ancient Greek? We shall just have to wait and see...

*Armand D’Angour lectures in Classics at Jesus College Oxford. His book The Greeks and the New: novelty in ancient Greek imagination and experience was published in 2011. He has written on Greek music and metre as well as composing ‘new’ verses in Greek and Latin.*

## **Armand D’Angour’s 2004 ode**

Blessèd Athens, land of Athena divine,  
city eternal of Theseus and the Erechtheïd line,  
of you will we sing, whence Athenians and heroes  
once of old set forth to contend in the Games  
of Olympia the shining. 5  
Now as good luck has decreed that you welcome the games  
here on your soil once again,  
let us hail your glory with Pindaric music.

Men and women, come to the hearth of the world,  
gathering here from afar, from nations and lands beyond count, 10  
exultant in strength and physique, steadfast in purpose  
to prevail, and keen in the service of peace  
to compete with one another.  
There will be grateful reward for the ones who excel  
thanks to their marvellous skills, 15  
and with finest music let us sing their praises.

May the sweet gift of success fall to each victor in turn,  
joy to the winners to whom God decrees it is their due –  
timely grace for victory justly attained.  
But, with God’s assent, may there shine on the city as well undying light, 20  
due to her welcoming gifts and her benevolent grace.  
Now, O mother-city of wisdom, famed throughout the length of Greece,  
receive with gladness this precious offering of words  
carefully wrought in the style of ancient times;  
and in finale, come let us hail you, with voices raised, at your height of fortune. 25

The original Greek version can be found on the website  
[http://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/outreach/features/greek\\_ode.pdf](http://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/outreach/features/greek_ode.pdf)